

Art Under the Nazi Regime

by Peter Eller

In spite of all that has been written about Adolf Hitler, historians remain puzzled by the how and why of Hitler's method of persuasion. How was he able to entrance and influence so many Germans and bend them to his will, and why were so many of them receptive?

The times were certainly a factor. The Weimar Republic after Germany's loss of the First World War was an honest yet feeble attempt to gather the various German states into a nascent democracy. Its quick demise had left the population, conditioned by centuries of autocratic rule, politically confused and divided. This confusion was heightened by daily fighting in the streets among the partisans of the two dominant ideologies, internationally minded communists and nationally oriented socialists. Along with the reparations demanded by the Allies, this confusion and conflict resulted in a tattered economy, inflation rising to more than one million Marks for one single Mark. The average German felt himself not just deprived, but lost in a social and cultural limbo, and searching for clarity and resolution, peace and normalcy. The result was the desire, felt as a need by many, for strong and resolute leadership.

To a large degree, therefore, Hitler's success was owing to his timely exploitation of this socio-political vacuum with the promise, at first nominally fulfilled, of restoring Germany not just to its former glory but to a grandeur and destiny beyond what it had possessed before. Hitler effectively won over his audiences by sharing with them, and instilling in them, a plausible vision of how he and the National Socialist German Workers' Party would guide the nation back to solidarity and wellbeing.

What made Hitler formidable as a speaker was his recognition of the longing of the German people for peace for the nation and a sense of personal and national pride for the individual. His speech in 1937 opening the exhibit of German art in the newly constructed Haus der Deutschen Kunst (the House of German Art) is an example of his smart, insidious method of persuasion.

Hitler's motivation is not easily understood. We should begin by recognizing his absolute belief in himself, a state of mind in which emotions become facts, and his opinions are the ineluctable truth.

Hans Hofmann speaks of “empathy” as the ability to convey one's emotions and consciousness into the consciousness of another. Empathy can therefore be

infectious. Within his own mind Hitler's opinions are an infectious, empathic argument; they reflect "his" understanding and consciousness of the world around him. His is a line of reasoning in which emotions and the sensibility upon which they are based stand out as facts, and opinions gain the assurance of truth. His reasoning always comes back to its fundamental emotional premise. As a result, his oratory not only instills his ideas in his audience, but is able to do so with complete, unquestionable sincerity. As his oratory rises to a passionate pitch, his audience too is overcome with the intensity of his passion.

To view him as a necromancer who seeks to convince his audience of known falsehoods is to misunderstand him. In fact, he is totally and frighteningly sincere. His word to him is truth, and similar to Eichmann who sees his job as fulfilling "transportation" quotas, Hitler himself is unaware of the real and utter depravity of his mind and actions. In effect he is *unmenschlich*; devoid of a moral sense, he is less than human.

By 1937 the spirit of revolution had also made itself felt in the world of art. In 1935 Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton had written a manifesto, "Toward a Free Revolutionary Art." Its vision sought to move beyond the commonly held or bourgeois understanding of art as mainly a beautifying endeavor. "Surely art is not merely decorative," they maintained; rather "it should be interwoven with the very stuff and texture of human experience, intensifying the experience, making it more profound ... clear and coherent." The authors then prescribe requisite conditions for this transcendent intensity of human experience. "This can be accomplished," they assert, "only if the artist is functioning freely in relation to society, and if society wants what he has to offer." Only by a broad variety of movements that speak to the respective interests of this society does a free art become possible.

In 1937, Adolf Hitler addresses the audience at the opening of German art held at the newly built exhibit hall, Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich. In contrast to Trotsky and Breton, Hitler's view is exclusionary. Modern art in its various guises and movements and countries of origin represents "a gruesome malfunctioning of the eye." Modernity in its various movements of art represents a disease against which there is only one solution. "I do not want anyone," he asserts, "to have false illusions. National Socialism has made it its primary task to rid the German Reich, and thus the German people and life, of all these influences which are fatal and ruinous to its existence." In the following paragraph he continues, "From now on we will wage an unrelenting war of purification against the last elements of putrefaction in our culture." Modern art is rotten, an infectious disease that must be exterminated in order for a new, national German art to thrive.

His initial approach to this revolutionary task is modest. The catastrophe of Germany's loss of the war has led to a radical conclusion, "...we are all conscious of the fact that not only the stone for a new building must be laid but the foundations for a new and true German art." The current tragedy is to be the basis for radical reform; it offers the opportunity to remake things, including art.

Hitler dramatizes this need for a restoration by the terms of a gutter mentality. The defeat in 1918 had produced a "Flood of slime and ordure," leading Germany, then "an already thoroughly diseased body" to "its inner decomposition." This has led to a neglect of cultural matters because of the general preoccupation with the economy. The result is a state of ignorance and above all an uncertainty born of confusion. These factors had two causes, of which the first is the general confusion. The second is that this confusion was made worse by Jews. Jews had taken over the shaping of public opinion, and Jewish artists, directors, critics, and others, had succeeded "not only in confusing the natural concepts about the nature and scope of art as well as its goals, but above all in undermining and destroying the [formerly] wholesome feeling" toward the arts and nation.

The result, an internationalizing of art and its fragmentation into various movements, left it "completely isolated from its ethnic origins." Furthermore, for this march of Futurism, Cubism, Dada, etc., the necessity that a "monstrously insane" babble of respective jargons will further separate art from any clear national origins. Confusion and its underlying uncertainty reigned, Hitler proclaims, "Until the moment when National Socialism took power." National Socialist Germany instead "wants again a 'German art,' and this art shall be of eternal value." Against the transient nature of various divergent movements, Hitler proposes a singular national art that will be permanent. With National Socialism, the proper role of German art will be restored.

The House of German Art is not built to contain a transient movement about to be replaced in the following years. Instead, it is intended to exhibit an art "of the German people." It is here that Hitler makes a false Darwinian argument. For a new German art to triumph, there must be a total extinction of all other competing forms and movements. "Not only all which had been created before us would fall victim to this mortality [extinction], but also what is being created today or will be created in the future."

This severe Darwinism also underlies the character Hitler proposes for the German people. By an evolutionary process of continually refining "crystallization," the German ethos has finally emerged with "a unified, well-rounded character" concentrated in the Aryan race.

Many traits, he maintains, have been attributed to the German people over the course of their history. However, the one most apt is more than a characterization, has instead devolved into a law, “the most beautiful law which I can envisage for my people.” One notes the possessive, as well as the meaning in German of the cardinal word. Law, or *Recht*, sets forth not only a rule but an entitlement. Therefore, when he continues that, “to be German is to be clear,” we understand that to be genuinely German one is entitled to and may demand clarity. A clarity by which Germans may demand that the confusing babble describing the various movements in art be censured and obliterated.

The German character however has two more attributes: “to be German means to be logical, and above all, to be true.” Here, to be logical is to adopt the logic of the National Socialist party, and to be true is to be loyal to it and its leader. It is the same line of reasoning or “logic” found in the instructions to the Ahnentafel, the genealogical chart Germans filled out to demonstrate their German ancestry. Its racial syllogism is simple: Jews could not be members of the Nazi party; therefore, Jews could not be Germans, (and thereby also lost protections of the law.)

The best examples of a true German art found in the past, he continues, had been exhibited in 1931 at the Glaspalast, the airy palace of glass in the biological park in Munich. The exhibit, which also contained works by Caspar David Friedrich, 1774 to 1849, and Philipp Otto Runge, 1777 to 1810, had been consumed by fire. They conveyed “the true intrinsic value of our people and the “honest” and “respectable” expression of those only inwardly experienced laws of life.” Additionally, he singled out for praise “the clear and simple manner in which these feelings were represented.”

The adjectives, clear, simple, honest and respectable, suggest the opposite of the varied, revolutionary and confusing styles of modern art. Like its antecedents, the new German art was to be “clear and simple” as well “honest and respectable.” It was to be an art made to appeal to a respectable middle-class audience that demanded simplicity and propriety presented in a manner reminiscent of the glories of the German past. This respectability is to stand in stark contrast to the work of modern artists, described as “the artifactitious stammerings of men to whom God has denied the grace of a truly artistic talent.” In short, degenerate art is art that deviates from the common norm and violates the sense of propriety of a conservative middle class. At the heart of this judgement is that modern art in Hitler's view is inherently confusing to the viewer--who must then think, and deliberate about the image before him. The moral is simple: “Works of art which cannot be understood in themselves ... but need bombastic instructions [such as “those” proposed by Jewish critics] for

their use ... these works of art from now on will no longer find their way to the German people.” Modern artists, as he concludes about the makers of Degenerate Art, are “rotten cretins, ... who on principle see meadows as blue, skies green, clouds sulphur yellow, and so on.”

And so comes the promise of deliverance. “In the name of the German people I want to forbid these misfortunates who quite obviously suffer from a disease ... a gruesome malfunctioning of the eyes.” These artists either are to be pitied; or, more appropriately, delivered to the organs of the state, as their perversions may fall under the jurisdiction of penal laws. The makers of modern art must be brought under control and subjected to such penalties as the law will allow. Modern art has become tantamount to a capital crime.

Hitler then returns to the theme of deliverance. The exhibit building and its corner stone in their meticulous construction are a model and inspiration to Germany's future artists. The building itself was carefully constructed not only to house but to inspire the German art of the future. As such, it imposes an obligation on these artists, as the diligence of the building's workmen “must be equaled by the diligence of those who want to be represented in this house.” The field of future German art has just become smaller, reduced to what may neatly fit a slogan: “German art will be of a Nazi mentality, for a Nazi mentality,” as the command to conformity grows ever stronger.

Hitler's words now rise to the level of Diktat; they are commands. Four years, the time of the building's construction, are long enough to reach a final judgement. “The cliques of babblers, dilettantes, and art crooks” who have so far been able to survive, “will be eliminated and abolished.” The House of German Art in Munich will stand alone, unchallenged by the alleged excesses and perversions of modernism. Future artists will draw inspiration from it. With such future exhibits--proper, simple, accessible and eternal in their manifestation--German art and its ethos will have reached its realization. Hitler will have fulfilled his promise, his gift of the new German art will be free of confusion. It will be respectable and clear.

The speech is finished except for the fanfare. Hitler now resorts to a quasi-Christian mysticism as he claims to access the word of God. “When once again in this realm of art the holy consciousness will have regained its full right, then, I have no doubt the almighty will elevate a few to equal ... the divinely inspired artists of the great past.” This will not only be an achievement of the future; it has already made its reappearance in some of the work in the present.

Part Christian mystic, part Nietzsche, Hitler has brought his audience to a state of deliverance. His innermost wish, he claims, is that the present opening

of the Haus Der Deutschen Kunst contributes not only to [Munich], this true city of art, but to the entire German nation. In life as in art, goes the implicit rule, loyalty to the Nazi party and its leader promises deliverance from the confusion and chaos, restoring to the average German a sense of clarity and self-respect.

Hitler has shared his consciousness, in the form of his most passionate inner thoughts, with his audience, and instilled (or infected) their consciousness with his. Moreover, he has made clear that he and the Nazi party offer a platform of hope for a grand future. For Germans, he asserts, “the highest value of a personality as an individual will make a triumphant reappearance.” The individual German's sense of order and confidence in himself and in his nation will have been restored.

Author's notes:

I have relied on the text of Hitler's speech found in Hershel B. Chipp's *Theories of Modern Art*, source book by artists and critics, with translation from the German by Ilse Falk.

Any discussion of this period benefits by our attention to its cardinal metaphors. Here Hitler's use of “purification” matches Eichmann's and the Wannsee Conference's use of “Transport.” Effectively both refer to the same activity.

It worth mentioning that by 1937 the German people on the whole were neither inordinately simple nor especially gullible, having already been intimidated by five years of Nazi thuggery by the SA and the Hitler Youth. In this context Kristallnacht along with the huge national events in which the military and growing power of the SS became ever more prominent. These along with torch parades and other, often seasonal events had their intended effect of awe and intimidation, often as much on Germans as it did on Jews.

As it is now difficult to envision Germany in a time before Hitler, I recommend Otto Friedrich, *Before the Deluge, A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920's*.

Reference may also be made to the work by Christopher B. Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book*, Tacitus's *Germania* from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich, for how the characterization of Germans as a people evolved over the centuries.

About the author:

Hans-Peter M. Eller was born in Dresden, March 1943. He holds a BA from C W Post College of Long Island University and a PhD from the University of New Mexico. He is retired as owner of the Peter Eller Gallery, and lives with his cat, Buster, in a small adobe house in one of downtown Albuquerque's old barrios.